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SLAVE CHILDREN OF TEXAS: A QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

by Elizabeth R. Rabe

"Do you think I could even fergit them slave days?" testified Susan Merritt of Rusk County when questioned by Alex Hampton of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in 1937. Merritt was one of the more than 2,000 former slaves—more than 600 of whom endured slavery in Texas—who were interviewed between 1936 and 1938 by federal employees. Historians have concluded that this collection of narratives, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, represents an invaluable source for the study of slavery.¹ Randolph B. Campbell made significant use of the narratives in his authoritative study of slavery in Texas, *An Empire for Slavery*.²

George P. Rawick, the general editor of the slave narratives, has contended that the Texas narratives are "probably one of the two most powerful and useful state collections." But for four decades, historians were not fully aware of the value of the Texas narratives. In the late 1930s, FWP workers deposited the 600 original interviews at the Barker Library at the University of Texas at Austin, then sent 181 of these, heavily edited, to the Library of Congress. The interview of Rosina Hoard of Travis County, for example, was reduced from nine pages to three, and FWP workers removed information that they found to be inappropriate. They deleted comments like "I know dat de slaves was glad to be free."³ Rawick, however, has compiled the original interviews for scholars.

Both Susan Merritt (b. 1851) and Rosina Hoard (b. 1859) witnessed slavery as children. In 1860, approximately 40 percent of the four million slaves in the United States were children under twelve years of age. Children were also numerous on Texas slave plantations. Richard Bennett Hubbard, the father of a future governor of Texas, owned 18 children on his Smith County plantation.⁴ But studies of slave life and culture by scholars like John Blassingame and Eugene Genovese have not emphasized the experiences of slave children. Randolph Campbell devoted only a few pages of analysis to slave children in Texas.⁵

Three scholarly studies have focused on young slaves. In *Deep Like the Rivers*, Thomas Webber explored the methods that slave parents used to educate their children. Wilma King, in *Stolen Childhood*, offered a comprehensive history of slave children in the antebellum South. King argued that "enslaved children had virtually no childhood," suffering fates similar to the horrors borne by children in times of war. In *Born in Bondage*, Marie Jenkins Schwartz differed with King, holding that, despite the rigors of slavery, slave children had childhoods, albeit peculiar ones. As children, slaves learned their complex roles on the plantation and in the slave community. Both King and Schwartz relied on the FWP slave narratives in conducting their research. But

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neither author investigated the lives of slave children in Texas.⁶

This article addresses a gap in the history of slavery in Texas by analyzing the interviews with 304 former Texas slaves, born between 1850 and 1863, conducted by the Federal Writers Project. The choice of these birth dates insured that the narrators' primary memory of slavery was a childhood memory. By the age of fifteen, slave children worked like adults, laboring as field workers, servants, or craftsmen. Excluded from this sample were those former slaves born in 1864 and 1865, who could not possibly have had any recollection of slave life. The median birth date of the 304 slaves was 1855—ten years old at the time of emancipation. When interviewed in the late 1930s, these former slaves were in their seventies and eighties but retained strong memories of their childhoods.

This study is not only qualitative but also quantitative. Former slaves' answers to specific questions were entered in a database. The 304 former slaves represented a fair sample of the Texas slave population in 1860. Most resided in East or Central Texas before 1865, 123 of them growing up in Travis, Harrison, Jasper, McLennan, Rusk, Washington, Tyler, Bastrop, or Cherokee counties. As Campbell demonstrated, almost half of Texas slaves lived on plantations with twenty or more slaves.⁷ Of the former slave children who responded to the question of residency, 59 percent lived on plantations; 31 percent resided on farms with five to nineteen slaves; and only 10 percent lived on small farms with between one and four slaves.

Texas was the frontier of slavery. When the Lone Star State joined the Union in 1846, its population began to expand rapidly. Southerners migrated to Texas, bringing their bondsmen with them. Between 1846 and 1860, the slave population of Texas grew from 30,505 to 160,467 and continued to grow during the Civil War. Allen Manning of Coryell County made the trip from Mississippi to Texas, remembering that "it look like everybody in the world was going to Texas."⁸ Indeed, 94 of the 304 FWP interviewees traveled to Texas with their owners, and 60 percent stated that their parents were born outside of Texas. These slaves walked or rode in covered wagons from southern states.

Upon arriving in Texas, virtually all slave children settled on farms or plantations in East or Central Texas. Slave masters put children to work at a young age. In the Texas slave narratives, 75 percent of the former slaves stated that they worked as children. Starting at about the age of four or five, a child began doing simple chores. Laura Ray's first job in Cherokee County was "totin water from the spring, sweepin yards an seein attar the chickens." Like Ray, young slave children often labored in and around the main house, with over 40 percent reporting that they worked indoors as well as out. Young children ran errands, cleaned the house, swept the yard, fetched water, minded the chickens, and fanned away flies. Fannie Norman of Travis County had to "chase flies w'en de Marster an' de Misse eat meals." Norman would "stand thar wid a big fan an' shoo de flies dat come 'round dem an' de table." Older female slave children frequently cared for the plantation owner's children.

Lucy Barnes of Harris County recalled that "I min's the chillun fo' my missie. Dat's my job. Wherever those chillun go, I go--sleep with 'em at night an' keep de cover on 'em." Barnes had a substantial responsibility for a twelve-year-old girl.

Slave children usually ended up working in the fields, producing cotton, corn, and wheat. Over 50 percent of slave children who worked toiled in the fields. Between the ages of eight and thirteen, children began training to become field hands. They tended the livestock, carried water to the field, hoed and plowed the crops, and picked cotton and corn. Jacob Branch of Chambers County commented that "by the time us good sprouts us pickin cotton and pullin cane. Us ain't never idle."¹⁰ By the age of fifteen, almost all children labored in the fields. A few gained skilled positions, working as servants, cooks, carpenters, blacksmiths, or craftsmen.

Children too young to work spent their days in the nursery. Nelson Hogan of Fort Bend, Texas, recalled that "dey keeps us chillen in de quatahs while de old ones is working in de fields." Mothers dropped their children off at the nursery on their way to the fields. The nursery was an enlarged cabin consisting of cradles, a playroom, and a fenced-in yard that allowed toddlers to crawl and walk around outside safely. Older female slaves tended these one-month to four-year-old children, and at the end of the day mothers retrieved their children from the nursery.¹¹

When not working, slave children found ways to amuse themselves. They were often left to their own devices without adult supervision. They explored the plantation's fields and woods while playing with one another. Slave children enjoyed games of marbles, house, hide and seek, and "shoo turkey," an adaptation of the game of tag. While playing, children liked to sing jingles. Smith Wilson of Smith County chanted jingles like "I'm a farmer man, Jing, Jang" and "Turn back your head and turn to the one you love." Some owners allowed slave children to socialize with white children. Anderson Jones of Limestone County recalled that Dr. Bedwell, his master, "had a boy named Horace, he wuz about de same age as myself, we played, rode horses, went huntin' and fishin' together."¹²

Although the majority of the ex-slaves reported enjoying games, not all slave children had time to play. Aunt Carolina Houston of Nacogdoches County declared, "I never played a game in all my life. Never had time to play." Houston spent her days in the main house working as a maid.¹³ All slave children ultimately shared in Houston's deprivation, for games and playtime ended early in a slave's life.

After work or play, children returned to the slave quarters in the evening to relax and sleep. Sixty percent of the interviewees noted that they had lived in the slave quarters, which served as the center of the slave community. The quarters consisted of a row of cabins, usually set behind the main house. Each slave family had its own one-room cabin constructed of logs, furnished with beds nailed to the walls and boxes and benches for seats. "We lived in cabins made of logs and chinked with mud mortar. We had beds that had only one

leg; they fit in each corner of the walls," recalled Hagar Lewis of Smith County.¹⁴ The cabins had dirt floors, holes for windows, and offered little protection from the cold in winter or from mosquitoes in the summer.

Slave children wore rough clothing. Boys and girls alike donned "long shirts slit up the side" made from homespun cotton in the summer and "linsey" wool in the winter. A child only received one or two "shirts" a year. At the age of ten to twelve, a child received trousers and a shirt or a dress. Children did not wear underwear beneath their clothing. Fortunate children had brogan shoes with brass toes in winter, but many went barefoot. John Wells of Hunt County stated that in winter "the snow cracked my feet open."¹⁵ Children like John Wells also suffered from frostbite and colds.

Texas slave children had abundant sources of food. A slave child's diet consisted of foods similar to those that made up an adult slave's diet. "Ash cakes" were a staple, made by "putting co'n meal batter in [corn] shucks and baking it in the ashes" of the fireplace.¹⁶ Texas slaves also consumed fresh or salted pork, molasses, and vegetables like sweet potatoes, greens, and black-eyed peas. Plantation cooks served these foods, mixed together, out of a big wooden bowl. Milk or parched-corn coffee accompanied these meals.

Slaves often supplemented their diets with fresh game and fish. On weekends, young boys accompanied their fathers or other male relatives on hunts. They hunted opossums, raccoons, deer, turkeys, squirrels, and rabbits in the woods and fields of East Texas. Lizzie Farmer reminisced that "when we cooked possum dat was a feast. We'd boil him with red pepper and take him out and put him in a pan and slice sweet 'taters and put round him and roast him." During their free time, both male and female slave children also fished. Fishing was Maggie Jackson of Cass County's favorite activity. She remembered that "most all the chillens use to go fishin' on Saturday. We would bend straight pins and use for hooks."¹⁷

Slave children reported being well fed, because their owners wanted them to develop into healthy, productive workers. Some, however, did not receive adequate amounts of food and stole to ease their hunger pains. Annie Row of Nacogdoches County remembered that "once w'en Ise jus a chile, Ise was hongry so Ise takes some ob de food f'om de dawg. Deys caught me adoin' dat, an' 'stead ob givin' me some food, deys give me de whuppin's."¹⁸ Row never forgave her master for her degrading treatment nor for forcing her to steal food from a dog to survive.

Like Annie Row, Texas slave children both witnessed and experienced cruelty and brutality early in their lives. Over 70 percent of the interviewees witnessed a beating or whipping. According to George W. Harmon of Lamar County, slaves were "whipped for any misdemeanor dislikable." Slaveholders, overseers, and patrollers beat and whipped slaves to assert and maintain their control. Children were encouraged to observe the punishments of their elders. On the Stevens plantation in Upshur County, the master required that all children witness the whippings of disobedient slaves. Callie Shepherd, a slave on the Stevens plantation, recalled that "dey used to tell us little childers to

look. Dey buckled 'em down on de groun' and laid it on dey backs. Sometimes dey laid on with a might heavy han'."19

Slave owners and overseers had few reservations about inflicting corporal punishment on children. Seventy-nine of the 304 interviewees testified to experiencing physical cruelty as children. They received whippings for talking back to their masters, for stealing food, for not completing an assigned task, for playing or sleeping instead of working, and for running away. Anna Miller of Palo Pinto had trouble staying awake through a full day of work. She often fell asleep early in the evening while hoeing or picking cotton. She remembered that "as sho as I does dat, Ise gits a whuppin." Alex Jackson of Upshur County enjoyed running and playing outside. One day he collided with his sister, Nancy, who was carrying a pail of milk to the main house. The milk spilled. For this misdeed, Jackson received "one of the worst whippings I ever got."²⁰

To survive, slaves developed close-knit families and communities. Historians have long debated whether slaves could maintain meaningful family relationships. The Texas slave narratives suggest that slave families were, in fact, resilient.²¹ Most Texas slave children lived with both their parents and their siblings. In fact, 217 of the FWP interviewees noted that they interacted daily with both their mother and father. A grandparent, an aunt, an uncle, or a cousin often resided with this nuclear family unit.

Slave parents had the difficult job of raising their children to survive under servitude. They taught their children to respect their slave elders, to maintain the confidentiality of the slave quarters, and to obey slave owners so as to avoid harsh punishments. Mary Glover of Sumpter, Texas shared with interviewer Alfred Menn what her mother had taught her. Mary's mother advised her children that "I ain't goin' to be wid yo' always. Yo' mind yo' boss man. Be good and he won't have to whoop yo. Don't take nothin' dat don't belong to yo'. Trust in de Lawd, and he will take care of you." Besides offering good advice, slave adults also spanked misbehaving children when necessary. But Mollie Dawson of Navarro County remembered that parents just had to "look out the corner of the eye at kids and they got good right now."²²

Slave parents, like all parents, loved their children. As a young boy, Will Adams of Harrison County looked forward to nighttime, when his father returned to the family cabin. Adams recalled that his father "would come in from the fiel' at night and take me out of bed, dress me, feed me, then play with me for hours." Adams's father must have been tired from working from dawn to dusk in the fields. But he always made time to spend with his son. Ninety-four percent of the former slaves spoke of having a close relationship with one of their parents. Sam Meredith Mason of Travis County spoke for many ex-slaves when he declared that "the memory of my mammy is one of the sweetest memories that I have. I had a very sweet mammy. She give all that she could give."²³

Mulatto slave children with white fathers and black mothers did not have close relationships with their fathers. When questioned about her father, Betty

White Irby of Burleson County replied that "I couldn't tell yo' much about my fathaw, 'cause I never did git to see him." All that she knew of her father was what her mother had told her. Irby's father was a Scots-Irishman named Harper. Mulatto children, like other slave children, could be sold or punished, and they generally lived in the slave quarters. But both blacks and whites viewed mulatto children as peculiarities. Because of the light-brown color of her skin, neither white nor black children would play with Sarah Allen. White FWP interviewers, like Fred Dibble, seemed compelled to comment about the physical features of mulattos. In the introduction to Ellen Nora Ford's interview, Dibble remarked that "Negro blood and characteristics are absent for she is the daughter of a white master."²⁴ Twelve of the 304 former slaves stated that they had white fathers.

Slave children valued their extended families—over 25 percent of the former slaves mentioned a grandparent, an aunt, or an uncle who helped raise them. Grandparents transmitted slave culture and religion to members of the younger generation. Patsy Moses of Fort Bend, Texas noted that "my ole granddad wuz de one dat tell us so many things, 'specially 'bout what de niggers did an believed."²⁵ As Thomas Webber pointed out, grandparents typically taught children stories and songs about religion, about Africa, and about plantation history.²⁶ Grandparents also doted upon their grandchildren, lavishing upon them attention or providing an extra piece of food. If a parent died or was sold, grandparents or other family members could be relied upon to care for the children left behind. When she was just a baby, Ellen Thomas's mother died and her grandmother reared her.²⁷

Slave children had occasional opportunities to learn outside the boundaries of the slave community. Unlike other slave states, Texas did not prohibit the education of slaves—consequently, 11 percent of the interviewees asserted that they learned to read or write while slaves. By comparison, Webber estimated that only about 5 percent of American slaves learned how to read.²⁸ Most literate slaves in Texas were taught by whites, particularly the sons and daughters of their owners. Sallie Wroe's master, Mike Burdette of Travis County, permitted his children to teach the slave children. "Massa Burdette 'low us nigger chillen come to de big house at night and his chillen larn us to read. Dey had blue-black spellers," related Wroe. Other slave owners, however, generally opposed their slaves becoming literate. Slaves who attempted to learn to read or write were severely punished. Maggie Matthews of Gonzales County remembered that "I was caught lookin' at a piece of paper wid writin' on it and I got a whoopin' fo' it. I had told 'em dat I could read whut was on it." Matthews actually lied about her reading abilities.²⁹

Slaves were chattel property that could be bought or sold at any time. Fifty of the 304 former slaves were sold as children. An additional fifty-two witnessed fellow slaves being auctioned. James Jackson of Bastrop County recalled that "dey sold an' traded de darkies lak dey do hoss's and mules. Dey would carry dem to de court house an' put dem on de block an' auction dem off to de highest bidder." Auctioneers sold parents apart from their children. Slave owners "didn't mind separatin' children from mothers anymore than a

calf from a cow," declared William Green of Wilson County. Frank Sparks of Nacogdoches County bought Willis Easter at the age of two, but did not purchase the little boy's mother or father.³⁰

Slave auctions proved traumatic experiences for both children and parents. On the day of a sale, children and parents alike shrieked and cried. Some children would never see their parents again. Fannie Moore Walker of Travis County was about two years old when her mother was sold. For years afterward, Walker questioned her father about her mother's whereabouts. She remembered, "when I was a little girl I used to cry and ask my papa 'Don't I have a mama? Where is she?' Papa would say, 'Aw, she's gone. She'll be back, don't you worry.'" But Walker was never reunited with her mother.³¹

The slave community adopted these forlorn children. Most of the interviewees enthusiastically spoke of a supportive slave community, reinforcing the theories of scholars like Blassingame and Genovese who have written about the vibrant nature of the slave community. The community centered on the slave quarters, where most slaves ate and slept. In order to survive, slaves realized that they needed to support each other and to stay together. Community members felt a familial bond toward one another, often addressing one another as brother or sister.

Everyone, including children, contributed to the community. Able-bodied adults hunted for fresh game, raised vegetable gardens, and labored around the quarters. Elder slaves accepted the responsibility of teaching and protecting the children. Children helped with the washing, sewing, gardening, and furniture repair. Throughout the day, they also toted drinking water to the fields. Children sometimes aided their elders with field work, particularly at harvest time. Each day slaves had work quotas that required them to pick a certain amount of cotton or weave a certain amount of cloth. Slaves could not stop working until they reached this goal; punishment for doing so was typically a whipping. To prevent this, children would pitch in and help. Henry Hence Smith of Smith County aided his mother in the fields. Smith remembered that "I stayed in front and helped her up when she got behind."³²

After a hard day of work, community members enjoyed spending time together in the slave quarters. Green Cumby of Rusk County recalled that "at night the slaves would gather roun' the cabins and talk 'til bed time. Sometimes we'd dance while some would knock out time for us by snappin' de finger and slappin' de knee."³³ Community members would share the news of the day with one another. At these informal gatherings, elders sometimes sang songs and told stories.

Texas slave children paid close attention to these stories and tales, many of which reaffirmed the values and attitudes held by the slave community. Storytellers continually reminded children to listen to their parents and to other slave adults. Darcus Barnett of Dresden, Texas heard many "stories 'bout de Indians scalping people and they toll us dat dey [the Indians] would git us if didn't be good chillins and mind." Storytellers also imparted lessons of courage, cunning, and heroism to children like Jack Dresso of Orange

County, who was thrilled by the exploits of "Bre'r Fox" and "Bre'r Rabbit." In these "Animal Trickster" tales, a smart but weak animal like a fox deceives a strong oppressor. These trickster tales symbolized the lowly slave outwitting his powerful master.³⁴

Children also learned the songs of the community from their elders. While toiling in the fields or relaxing in the quarters, slaves sang together. One person would begin a hymn, and another would pick up the tune. In this way, the song spread until everyone, including children, was singing. Slaves sang spirituals, work songs, love songs, and lullabies. Many songs promised a better life in the next world. On the Dunn Plantation in Dallas County, slaves chanted:

"Masse sleeps in de feathah bed,
Nigger sleeps on de flooah.
Whin we'ns all git to Heaven,
Dey'll be no slaves no mo'."³⁵

In other songs, slaves communicated with one another. Slaves on the Washington plantation in Travis County warned each other when the master was coming by singing "Ole hog 'round de bench-Ole hog 'round de bench." The workers would make sure that they were toiling hard by the time Master Pratt Washington reached their row.³⁶

Children learned to maintain the confidentiality of the slave community at a young age. Slave adults taught children that what was said or done in the quarters should never reach white ears, even when slave owners tried to coax children into betraying their elders. Betty Power's mistress, Mrs. Perry, would have Betty spy to see if all of the house servants were working. Powers, of Harrison County, remembered that "once she sends me to de sewin' room to see if de womens am wo'kin'. Some dem am, an' some of dem aint. W'en Ise returns Ise says 'Deys all wo'kin'.' Yous see, Ise raised by my mammy to tell nothin' Ise sees."³⁷ Betty Powers had undoubtedly protected female members of the community from a severe reprimand or worse.

Slave children looked forward to holidays. Former slaves told of celebrating Christmas, the Fourth of July, Easter, and New Year's Day. Slave masters furnished their bondsmen a large feast on these days of rest. Slaves ate delicacies like turkey, chicken, fruit, cake, white-flour biscuits, and "cracklin" bread. After this special dinner, the slave community sponsored a large dance. According to Jack Bess of Goliad County, these holiday dances were joyous. Bess declared that at Christmas "we jes' tears up de country. Lawdy! Lawd! Dat fiddlin' went on all night, and we dance awhile den lay down and sleeps, den gits up and dances some mo'e." On Christmas day, slave children also received small presents. Slave masters played Santa Claus and gave candy, fruit, and nuts to slave children. On the Moody plantation in Orange County, children received "a pair 'r' stockin's n' a stick 'r' sugah candy" on Christmas day.³⁸ Slaves did not, however, celebrate their birthdays. Only 18 percent of the ex-slaves even knew the exact date of their birth.

Slave owners sponsored large celebrations at the conclusion of the fall harvest, which typically ended with a "hog killing" and a "corn shucking." At a "hog killing" the slaves slaughtered the plump hogs then salted, cured, and dried much of the meat in the smokehouse. Children helped "wid grindin' de meat fo' sausages." At the conclusion of the "hog killing," slaves held a party at which they ate fresh pork. "Corn shucking" was also "a big occasion them days." At a corn shucking, slaves of all ages would remove the husks from ears of corn while socializing. When all the corn was shucked, the slaves feasted and danced all night.³⁹ These two working holidays provided food for the slaves for the entire year.

For both slave adults and children, the best time of the week was Saturday evening. Slaves finished work on Saturday afternoon and did not resume work until Monday morning. Slave communities held parties or dances on Saturday nights. Dave Byrd of Houston County recalled that there was "banjo picking, tin pan beating and negro dance" almost every Saturday night. Sometimes slaves from neighboring or nearby plantations attended. At these gatherings, children danced, sang, and played games with one another. Children also loved to watch jig contests, in which two slaves "put a glass of wauter on deir heads an' den see who can dance de hardest wid out spillin any water."⁴⁰

After a festive night, slaves reserved Sunday for doing chores around the quarters and attending church in the afternoon. Slaves held church in a slave cabin in winter and in a grove of trees in summer. According to Mosc Hursey of Red River County, these gatherings were "right fine meetin's, too. They'd preach and pray and sing-shout, too." Slaves sang spirituals like "Roll, Jordan, Roll," "Sing Low Sweet Chariot" and "Come We that Love the Lord." Participants also listened to sermons that their black preachers, personally chosen by slave owners, delivered. Often, such mandatory sermon topics as loyalty, honesty, and obedience reinforced the owners' wishes that members of the slave congregations defer to their earthly masters. As Simpson Campbell of Harrison County observed, "in slavery time the colored preachers had to preach what they was told to preach ... obey your Master and Mistress."⁴¹ On other plantations, slave owners themselves, or less frequently a white minister, preached or read the Bible to slaves on Sunday afternoons.

Slave communities also organized their own clandestine congregations. Susan Merritt remembered, "at night the slaves would gather round the fireplace on their knees and pray, and sing, and cry, but they darsn't let the white fo'ks know anything about it." Like Merritt, seventy-eight other interviewees spoke of attending worship services without white authorities present. William Moore of Limestone County prayed for freedom. Moore and his elders would moan low and gentle 'Some day, some day, some day-this yoke going to be lifted off'n our shoulders-some day, some day, some day."⁴² Slaves placed large pots in the centers of their congregations to absorb their cries for emancipation.

In addition to participating in clandestine congregations, children resisted slavery in small, numerous ways. Historians like Lawrence Levine

have argued that American slaves understood that they lacked the power to overthrow the slave system through a mass uprising or rebellion. Still, slaves resisted slavery by forming sustaining communities and by secret acts of defiance.⁴¹ Approximately 25 percent of the slave children told of trying to undermine the slave system. Slaves stole food like fresh hog meat, chicken, white flour, and fruit. When she served dinner at the main house, Ida Henry of Harrison County stole food. Henry remembered that "I would put biscuits and pieces of chicken in a sack under de dress dat hung from my waist." Later Henry would slip off and eat this food herself or deliver it to the quarters. Slave children also brought food to runaway slaves hiding in the woods. Catharine Green's father ran to the woods whenever he knew that he was going to receive a punishment. But her father could only stay in the woods as long as Green, of Bastrop County, brought him food.⁴²

Slave children did not often attempt to run away. Mose Smith of Lamar County was the only interviewee who tried to escape slavery permanently. Children understandably did not want to leave the security of their parents or the community. If a child ran away, it was usually only for a few hours or days hiding in surrounding fields or woods. Some simply wanted to take a break from work, others to postpone an imminent whipping or to recover from a punishment. The first and only time Calvin Kennard ran away was "de furst time my ole mistress got atter me to whup me." Kennard stayed away for four days, but snuck to "de house an' eat all I wanted den I would git out an' hide 'roun in de lot an' fodder stacks."⁴³ Six other interviewees ran away for short periods of time.

During their preteen years, slave children may not have always grasped the meaning of slavery. Their parents tried to shield them from the realities of bondage. Guy Stewart cherished his childhood in Travis County. "Dem whar de happy days ob my life," professed Stewart.⁴⁴ Children like Stewart assumed that they were safe and secure. They had the precious love of their parents and the camaraderie of the slave community.

But one brutal event in a child's life—be it receiving a whipping, watching the beating of a parent, witnessing the lashing of an elder, or experiencing the sale of a family member—could immediately destroy this sense of security. More than one hundred former slaves told about experiencing a dreadful, life-altering event that caused them to realize that they were chattel property, subject to the commands of their masters. Their parents, grandparents, and elders were not in control. These dire experiences also left indelible imprints on the consciousnesses of slave children. When interviewed more than seventy years after emancipation, former slaves described traumatic incidents in vivid detail. Ida Henry saw a plantation cook's eyes poked out because the dinner potatoes had not been thoroughly cooked. Anthony Christopher of Brazoria County watched as an overseer held "bacon over a fire and let de hot grease drop on de bare hide" of a field worker who had not completed his task fast enough. Wesley Burrell of Washington County observed the lashing of a pregnant woman. Laura Cornish discovered Lodge and Baldo, two highly

regarded community members, hiding in the woods with slashed backs. After looking at Lodge and Baldo's lacerated backs, Cornish never ate watermelon again, because "de red meat look jes' like de bloody shirts of old Lodge an' Baldo an jes' to think of it 'bout makes me sick to my stomach."⁴⁷ Children, like Cornish, experienced helplessness and rage when they saw the humiliation of a respected elder.

Most painful for children to view was the punishment of a parent or family member. The slave family was the center of any child's world. Anthony Lacy of Jasper County recounted that observing his mother being whipped "skeert me and mek my heart so' [sore]." For Ellen Nora Ford of Colorado County, the day that her owner beat her mother "was a cryin' day for me." Walter Rimm of San Patricio County could only "stand dere and cry" when he saw his father thrashed for the first time.⁴⁸ The sharpest memory of most interviewees was witnessing the beating or whipping of a family member.

Every time a parent received a punishment, the slave master asserted his power over the family. Smith Wilson stared as his mother was whipped until she could not walk, then helped carry her to the field to pick cotton. Because of this cruelty, Wilson and his playmates became "so afraid of master Hyns that when us nigger kids seen him coming we would run like turkeys and hide." Corporal punishment left visible reminders for children as well. Anthony Lacy declared that "you couldn' lay yo han' on my mudder' back but you would hit a stripe."⁴⁹ These scars confirmed the authority of slave masters.

Parents could not protect their children from experiencing or watching these brutalities. Sallie Wroe saw her sister beaten by the overseer because she did not complete all of her assigned work. Nellie Hill's master made her hold a candle as he lashed her brother Mose one night. Hill, who lived in Gay Hill, Texas, asserted that "when I 'members dat night, I gets de shivers yet."⁵⁰

Viewing the punishment of a family member caused some young children to react violently. While minding the hogs, William Moore heard a scream. He discovered his mother tied to a tree and Master Tom Waller with a bullwhip in his hand. Moore begged Waller to stop lashing his mother. Waller instead hit Moore, who remembered, "I goes crazy ... I see a big rock and I take it and I throw it and it ketches Marse Tom in the skull." Moore and his mother then had to hide in the woods for three months. Julia Williams of Marion County adored her aunt, who lived on the next plantation, and abhorred watching her being whipped. Whenever Mr. Pruitt, the plantation owner, beat her aunt, Smith would "git chunks of dirt an' throw at him to make him stop."⁵¹

Most children, however, realized that they could not physically overpower the person administering a punishment. But the humiliation of a family member still incensed them. When he heard his mother cry 'Pray Missus' in the middle of a lashing, seven-year-old James Barber of Brazoria County became distressed and grabbed the whip to give his mother a short respite from the agony of the lash. Like Barber, Jacob Branch could not stand to watch the pain on his mother's face during a "cowhiding." Branch, of

Chambers County, remembered “many’s de time I edges up and take some dem licks off my mama.”⁵²

Often the most memorable event was the first beating or serious punishment that a child received. It could be for playing instead of working, not completing a task, talking back, or stealing. Many children experienced their first punishment at a young age. When he was four years old, Tob Davis of Nacogdoches received his first beating. The plantation owner, Jack Turnipseed, caught Davis trying to eat a stolen raw egg in the chicken house. Turnipseed paddled Davis hard, threatening “I’s ‘test de egg suckin’ dawg, an don’t lake de egg suckin’ nigger any bettah. Ise kills de dawgs dat suk eggs, so youse bettah be careful.”⁵³ Davis told his FWP interviewer that he took Turpinseed’s death threat seriously.

Several former slaves could not remember why they received punishments. Susan Merritt told of being hit on numerous occasions by her mistress. “Lots of times she tied me to a stob out in the yard and ‘cowhide’ me till she give out, then she leave me and go rest and come back and beat me some more,” noted Merritt. These “cowhidings” drew blood. Merritt’s mother had to “grease” Merritt’s back to ease the pain. These lashings often caused Merritt to spend a week in bed with fever, and the beatings later ran together in Merritt’s mind. Other slaves asserted that they had been beaten brutally for no reason. President Wilson of McLennan County maintained that “dey’d whip us without no excuse lots of times.”⁵⁴ Some former slaves were willing to describe cruelties in chilling detail; others could not even relate what had happened to them, for their memories were too painful. Martin Ruffin remembered that when he was punished “the blood would fly.” But when an FWP interviewer asked Ed Jackson of Travis County about his life as a slave child, Jackson replied “I jest rathah not talk about it.” Jackson explained “my life back there wa’nt so sweet. They was ha’d on you—got some scars I’m carrin right down to my grave.”⁵⁵

Slave owners knew that these punishments affected children and other members of the slave community. The town of Jasper had a public whipping post where all members of the town could watch the punishment of a slave. Public whippings of runaways occurred “so’s the slaves could see what happens when theys tries to get away,” noted Esther Easter of Fannin County. Slave masters thought that the more graphic the punishment the less likely other slaves were to perpetrate the same crime. But these whippings did not always have the intended effect. While watching the lashing of the run-away, Easter remembered being “full of misery when I see the lash cutting deep into the boys skin. He swells up like a dead horse.”⁵⁶ Easter’s first reaction was sympathy for the boy, not fear of running away.

Former slaves carried these memories into the twentieth century. The cruelties of slavery still infuriated and angered them. Smith Wilson declared that his master “was one of the meanest men I ever knowed ... he is dead and gone to the devil and I hope he is getting just what he give to his nigger slaves.” Incensed at the suffering of his mother, Wilson hated the man who

hurt her for seventy years. Letha Hatcher, the FWP worker who interviewed Anthony Lacy, noted that "his spirit seems to revolt yet at his master's unjust and cruel treatment of his slaves."⁵⁷ Lacy, like Wilson, had witnessed the beating of his mother.

Not all of the FWP interviewees retained the rage of Smith Wilson and Anthony Lacy. About 15 percent of the 304 interviewees spoke fondly of slavery. Aleck Trimble informed his listener that "I warn't so glad when freedom come ... I t'ought I was jis' as near hebben as I want to be."⁵⁸ Statements like Trimble's have troubled historians.⁵⁹ But the FWP interviews must be read and analyzed in a historical context. These interviews took place in segregated Texas in the midst of the Great Depression. Most former slaves lived in poverty, surviving on a meager state pension of between eight and twelve dollars per month. Many actually begged their interviewers for money. These former slaves remembered, of course, that their former owners had provided for their basic material needs. They may have also wanted to please their white interviewers. Nonetheless, those who spoke favorably of the past constituted a distinct minority. Carter Jackson of Rusk County typically asserted: "If youse want to know 'bout slavery, it was Hell!"⁶⁰

After emancipation, freed slaves moved on with their lives. Some pardoned and absolved those who had mistreated them. Louiviana Pleasant Young of Washington County told her interviewer that everything was "all right now, 'cause I'se done prayed and forgive ebberbody fo' whut dey done to me." Betty Powers agreed that placing trust in God was the best course, for "de Lawd took care of slavery." But Susan Merritt, who vowed to leave things to God, foresaw a tumultuous doomsday, predicting "there sho' is going to be lots of soul cry against them in judgement."⁶¹

Slave children led hard lives, but they believed that they belonged to a community. The Federal Writers Project interviews demonstrate that the slave children of Texas remembered their parents, family members, and elders, all of whom showered them with love and attention, fondly. Children also knew that they were valued members of a larger slave community. They completed chores, joined in songs, listened to folklore, and attended social gatherings, all of which provided happy memories for former slaves. Nonetheless, slavery was a devastating experience for children. These young Texans realized that they were chattel property. They knew that they could be arbitrarily punished or sold. They witnessed the humiliation of their parents, family members, and elders. And they carried the physical and mental scars of slavery with them for the rest of their lives.

NOTES

¹George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Series 1, 19 vols.; Supplement, Series 1, 12 vols.; Supplement, Series 2, 10 vols. (Westport, Connecticut, 1972-1979). Hereafter cited as AS with series, volume, page number, and name of interviewee.

²Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas* (Baton Rouge, 1989).

¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2: xxviii-xxxix.

²Elizabeth R. Rabe, "Richard Bennett Hubbard, Jr., and the African Americans on the Hubbard Plantation," *Texas Historian* 56 (September, 1995): pp. 4-7.

³John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Campbell, *Empire for Slavery*, pp. 119, 160, 162-164.

⁴Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York, 1978); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1995), xx-xxi; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000), pp. 1-18.

⁵Campbell, *Empire for Slavery*, p. 194.

⁶AS, Series 1, 7, Part A, 221 (Allen Manning).

⁷AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 3263 (Laura Ray); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 2928 (Fannie Norman); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 178 (Lucy Barnes).

⁸AS, Series 1, 4, Part A, 178 (Jacob Branch).

⁹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1756 (Nelson Hogan); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2875 (Hannah Mullins); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 104 (George Austin).

¹⁰AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4271 (Ruth Wood); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4233 (Smith Wilson); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2064 (Anderson Jones).

¹¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1804 (Aunt Carolina Houston).

¹²AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2331 (Hagar Lewis).

¹³AS, Series 1, 7, Part A, 263-5 (Red Richardson); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 3718 (Peter Mitchell); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 3088 (Lee Pickett); AS, Series 1, 11, Part A, 85 (John Wells).

¹⁴AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1261 (Minerva Edwards).

¹⁵AS, Series 1, 7, 98 (Lizzie Farmer); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1901 (Maggie Jackson).

¹⁶AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 3370 (Annie Row).

¹⁷AS, Supplement, Series 1, 12, 142 (George W. Harmon); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 9, 3507 (Callie Shepherd).

¹⁸AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2683 (Anna Miller); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1877 (Alex Jackson).

¹⁹Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976).

²⁰AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1515 (Mary Glover); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1125-1126 (Mollie Dawson).

²¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 11 (Will Adams); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2597 (Sam Meredith Mason).

²²AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1856 (Betty White Irby); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 44-47 (Sarah Allen); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1354 (Ellen Nora Ford).

²³AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2780 (Patsy Moses).

²⁴Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 175.

²⁵AS, Supplement, Series 2, 9, 3791 (Ellen Thomas).

²⁶Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, p. 175; Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 131.

²⁷AS, Series 1, 5, Part B, 223 (Sallie Wroe); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2624 (Maggie Matthews).

²⁸AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1898 (James Jackson); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1595 (William Green); AS, Series 1, 4, Part B, 1 (Willis Easter).

²⁹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 3925 (Fannie Moore Walker).

³⁰AS, Series 1, 10, Part B, 196 (Henry Smith).

³¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1004 (Green Cumby).

⁴⁴AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 190 (Darcus Barnett); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1998 (Jack Dresso).

⁴⁵AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4114 (Millie Williams).

⁴⁶AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1732 (Rosina Hoard).

⁴⁷AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 3138 (Betty Powers).

⁴⁸AS, Series 1, 4, Part A, 74 (Jack Bess); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2723 (Andrew Moody).

⁴⁹AS, Series 1, 5, Part A, 266 (Martin Ruffin); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1428 (Rosanna Frazier); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1885-1886 (Carter J. Jackson).

⁵⁰AS, Supplement, Series 2, 3, 566 (Dave L. Byrd); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 468 (Fred Brown).

⁵¹AS, Series 1, 4, Part B, 170 (Mose Hursey); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 3, 615 (Simpson Campbell).

⁵²AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2642 (Susan Merritt); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2766 (William Moore).

⁵³Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977).

⁵⁴AS, Series 1, 7, Part A, 136 (Ida Henry); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1572 (Catharine Green).

⁵⁵AS, Supplement, Series 1, 12, 276-279 (Mose Smith); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2179 (Calvin Kennard).

⁵⁶AS, Supplement, Series 2, 9, 3733 (Guy Stewart).

⁵⁷AS, Series 1, 7, Part A, 134-137 (Ida Henry); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 3, 719 (Anthony Christopher); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 3, 534-538 (Wesley Burrell); AS, Series 1, 3, Part A, 941 (Laura Cornish).

⁵⁸AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2254 (Anthony W. Lacy); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1354 (Ellen Nora Ford); AS, Series 1, 5, Part A, 248 (Walter Rimm).

⁵⁹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4229 (Smith Wilson); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2253 (Anthony Lacy).

⁶⁰AS, Series 1, 5, Part B, 223 (Sallie Wroe); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1727 (Nellie Hill).

⁶¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2769 (William Moore); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4091 (Julia Williams).

⁶²AS, Supplement, Series 2, 2, 150-152 (James Barber); AS, Series 1, 4, Part A, 139 (Jacob Branch).

⁶³AS, Supplement, Series 2, 4, 1080 (Tob Davis).

⁶⁴AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2643 (Susan Merritt); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4206 (President Wilson).

⁶⁵AS, Series 1, 5, Part A, 266 (Martin Ruffin); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1888 (Ed Jackson).

⁶⁶AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2479 (Bill McCray); AS, Series 1, 7, Part A, 89 (Esther Easter).

⁶⁷AS, Supplement, Series 2, 10, 4227 (Smith Wilson); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 6, 2253 (Anthony Lacy).

⁶⁸AS, Series 1, 5, Part B, 109 (Aleck Trimble).

⁶⁹C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review* 79 (April, 1974), pp. 475.

⁷⁰AS, Supplement, Series 2, 5, 1883 (Carter Jackson).

⁷¹AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8, 3099 (Louisiana Pleasant Young); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 8 3142 (Betty Powers); AS, Supplement, Series 2, 7, 2645 (Susan Merritt).